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## 8. International adoption and cultural insecurity

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### INTRODUCTION

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, international adoption has become an increasingly visible and normative way to make a family.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is global because it involves many sending and receiving continents, regions, and countries. Between 1998 and 2004 the total number of children adopted in 20 countries increased from 31 667 to 45 016, or by 42 percent. The United States (US) is the world's leading recipient of internationally adoptive children. Norway and Spain are among the top recipients. In Spain, international adoptions doubled between 1998 and 2000 and nearly tripled by 2004, making Spain the second-largest receiving country after the United States in terms of the actual number of international adoptions (Selman 2009, pp. 32, 34). Other countries showing an above-average increase were Ireland, Italy, and the Netherlands.

World regions, such as East Asia and Eastern Europe, and specific countries, such as Guatemala and Ethiopia, have been major sources of internationally adoptive children in recent times. For example, Asian children have comprised the majority of children internationally adopted by US citizens. Between 1971 and 2001, US citizens adopted 265 677 children from other countries, and 156 491 of those children were from Asian countries. Since the late 1990s, China has been a major sending nation of international adoptive children. In 2000, it led the list of the top 20 primary sending countries, with 5095 children from China adopted by US citizens. South Korea, Vietnam, India, and Cambodia were among the top ten primary sending nations (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2012). Russia, Guatemala, Romania, and Ukraine have also been top sending countries of adoptive children to the United States.

The origins of the rise of international adoption are complex and multi-layered, involving the creation of a supply of adoptive children in the sending countries (often initially through war, political instability, and/or natural disaster) as well as the decreasing supply of adoptive children in the receiving countries (especially as the result of birth control and

other family planning practices, and the increasing social legitimacy of single parenthood). Specific transnational linkages between sending and receiving countries enable and facilitate adoption between them. And the reasons behind the persistence of international adoption and the implementation of its practice change over time.

The heightened visibility of international adoption is partly due to its predominantly transracial nature, involving the adoption of children by parents of a different, and predominantly white, racial background (Brian 2012; Louie 2015). While international, transracial adoption has challenged xenophobic and racist sentiments, its increasing popularity in the United States is also the result of strong critiques of the transracial adoption of African American and Native American children by white American families. In the 1960s and 1970s, critics argued that these transracial adoptions were a product of as well as perpetuated systematic racism and cultural imperialism, culminating in the 1972 National Association of Black Social Workers' public opposition to transracial adoption, and the passage of the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act that deterred the adoption of Native American children by non-Native Americans (Herman 2008, pp. 229–252). Furthermore, some scholars have argued that racial stereotypes of Asian children as “model minorities” with a more “flexible difference” in contrast to “less assimilable” African American children undergird a racial preference for the international adoption of Asian children (Dorow 2006, pp. 37–38).

The visibility and popularity of international adoption also stems from the mainstream media that publicizes the suffering of orphaned, abandoned, and needy children in the sending countries as well as the heart-warming adventures of both celebrity and everyday families who have adopted internationally. At the same time, the media has also increased public awareness of the connections between international adoption and the commodification and trafficking of children for a lucrative adoption market. For example, the phenomenon of Chinese international adoption, especially Chinese baby girls, after the implementation of China's one-child policy and its increasing standardization of international adoption laws and regulations, created a situation in some rural areas where “instead of levying fines for violations of China's child policies, greedy officials took babies, which would each fetch \$3000 in adoption fees” (Demick 2009). Thus, international adoption is highly controversial.

In 1993, 66 nations approved The Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and the Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (Hague Adoption Convention) in order to prevent the abduction, sale of, and/or trafficking of children (HCCH 2017). The United States signed The Hague Adoption Convention in 1994 and ratified it with the passage of the

Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000. While both the agreement and the Act aim to protect birth and adoptive parents and to uphold the best interests of children, legal scholar Jaci L. Wilkening has observed that The Hague Adoption Convention and the Intercountry Adoption Act do not provide adequate post-adoption services for families and adoptees, thus creating a problematic legal and social service gap, especially regarding the medical and mental health needs of adoptees (Wilkening 2011). Whether or not genetic testing can provide adoptees and their families with useful health information when birth family history is sparse or non-existent remains a question (May et al. 2015).

Since 2005, the decrease in international adoption numbers has affected many receiving countries (Selman 2009, p. 34). Top sending countries of adoptive children, such as China, established multiple restrictions relating to prospective adoptive parents' income, weight, marital status, and sexual orientation. Charges of fraud and child trafficking in sending countries, such as Cambodia, Vietnam, and Nepal, and political tensions between countries, such as Russia and the United States, have resulted in the termination of specific international adoption flows. The future of international adoption is uncertain and precarious, compelling some potentially adoptive families to turn to other ways of making a family (Jordan 2017).

Yet, the significance of international adoption cannot be reduced to increasing or decreasing numbers of adoptees, because they are intimately connected to larger communities in their adoptive countries, original countries, and the adoptee diaspora. In his case study of international adoption in Australia, scholar Richard Gehrman (2012, p. 114) admits that the estimated 9000 international adoptees comprise a relatively small community. However, he observes that "intercountry adoptees are adopted into an immediate family of at least one Australian adult, so, when their adoptive parents, adoptive siblings, and extended family members (and upon reaching adulthood their own spouses and children) are considered, this extended community might easily number more than 100 000 members."

In his observation that adoptees create an extended community that exceeds their actual numbers, Gehrman makes another important point: adoptees become adults. Given the longer history of international adoption, multiple generations of international adoptees are adults. In addition to having their own families by getting married and having children, they have created new forms of kinship with one another through social, educational, and political organizations that serve the interests of adoptees. The formation of a diasporic adoptee consciousness is a fundamental part of this activity, one in which artistic expression, especially through writing, film, and visual art, plays a formative role. By publishing, producing, and

exhibiting their histories, experiences, and concerns through the arts, adult adoptees create a distinctive body of knowledge about the international adoption experience that foregrounds their subjectivities, desires, and needs.

While the importance of adoptee voices in the documentation and analysis of the phenomenon of international adoption may seem obvious, their artistic work is not as widely known. This is partly due to the relatively recent growth of their creative work and their creation of adoptee-centric networks and organizations beginning in the 1990s. But it also stems from some international adoptees' critique that is difficult to confront because of the popular conceptualization of international adoption as a form of humanitarian rescue and a privileged form of migration. This critique includes, but is not limited to, highlighting fraud and corruption in the international adoption process; narrating the trauma, racism, and abuse they have encountered within their adoptive families and communities; emphasizing the existence of birth families; documenting their efforts to reunite with them; bringing attention to the statelessness of some international adoptees that has resulted in their deportation; and expressing their experiences of alienation in both their original and adoptive countries. These individual and collective struggles are also struggles for the cultural security of international adoptees.

Although the concept of cultural security is not typically associated with international adoption, it provides a useful lens to understand the history of the phenomenon, especially the rationale for its practice and well as the controversial debates that have accompanied its development. In a chapter of a 2004 anthology on globalization, migration, and cultural security, international relations scholar Majid Tehranian (2004, p. 3) defines cultural security as "the security of personal and collective negotiations that are so characteristic of our mobile postmodern world. It includes but is not limited to freedom of thought, conscience, language, speech, life style, ethnicity, gender, association, assembly as well as cultural and political participation." Perhaps more relevant to the study of international adoption is cultural security's opposite: cultural insecurity. Tehranian (2004, p. 4) continues: "What is cultural insecurity? Cultural security can be best understood by its opposite." He presents multiple examples of cultural insecurity, including the Kurds in Turkey who are stateless and are discriminated against; girls in Afghanistan who are denied education and other human rights; and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe.

Building upon Tehranian's insights, the purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it provides an overview of the histories of international adoption and the controversies surrounding it. Second, this chapter emphasizes the significance of artistic expression by adult international

adoptees for a more comprehensive understanding of international adoption and its relationship to cultural security and insecurity. It features the work of songwriter Jared Rehberg, painter Xhiv Bogart, and writer Jane Jeong Trenka, who were adopted from Vietnam, Guatemala, and Korea, respectively. I suggest that cultural security for international adoptees should and can be strengthened when their needs for diverse and multiple forms of belonging are recognized and acknowledged. Artistic expression by and about international adoptees provides an important venue for this recognition and acknowledgement. The chapter concludes with information about organizations, such as KoRoot and the Adoption Museum Project, that support the creation and dissemination of international adoptee histories, contemporary concerns, and cultural productions.

## INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION HISTORIES

When the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti brought renewed attention to the international and transracial adoption of Haitian children by white American families, much of the media coverage was controversial and, unfortunately, one-dimensional. Soon after the worst natural disaster in Haiti's history, the story of ten white Americans who were detained at the Dominican border for "kidnapping" 33 Haitian children dominated American news coverage. Immediately some observers began taking sides for the Americans, who they claimed had good intentions to rescue these children through international adoption; while others harshly criticized them for infringing upon Haitian national sovereignty. There was little mention of previous attempts to rescue children in the wake of catastrophe by adopting them, of the complexity of processing sound and ethical international adoptions, or even the significance of racial difference in transracial adoptions. Given the long twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century histories of international and transracial adoption, we can and should have a more informed and productive discussion.

The origins of international adoption are rooted in the rescue of children during and after war. Anthropologist Diana Marre and gender and women's studies scholar Laura Briggs (Briggs and Marre 2009) have noted that these humanitarian impulses were the product of shifting ideas in the early twentieth century about children and childhood. Once thought of as miniature adults and workers, children now occupied a distinct life stage of innocence requiring special protection. The emergence of pediatrics as a medical specialty in the early twentieth century; the Polish-Jewish physician Janus Korczak's writing about "children's rights" in 1910; and the organization of a series of American Child Congresses in 1916 by a

group of physicians from Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, exemplify the international dimensions of this conceptual shift.

European international adoption emerged in the 1930s and 1940s in response to human rights abuses against civilians including, but not limited to, the bombing of Guernica by Franco's forces, the German Luftwaffe, the Blitzkrieg against London, the Allied firebombing of Dresden, and the Holocaust of Jews committed by the Nazis. These atrocities resulted in the evacuation of unaccompanied children, such as the exodus of young people from Guernica into foster and adoptive homes in Mexico, Scandinavia, the Soviet Union, and Belgium.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Europe was a major sending region of adoptive children, primarily German, Greek, and Italian children, to the United States.<sup>2</sup> The destructive and chaotic aftermath of World War II in these European countries had left children orphaned and impoverished, while the United States had been largely untouched by war damage. By the mid-1950s a demographic shift had occurred. The supply of European children had dwindled, but an increasing number of children from East Asia were available for adoption (Choy 2013).

The post-World War II US occupation of Japan (1945–1952) and the US Cold War involvement in the Korean War (1950–1953) created a population of mixed-race children of American servicemen and Japanese and Korean women. Beginning in the 1950s, American families began adopting children of different racial backgrounds from Asian countries in significant numbers. These pioneers of international and transracial adoption adopted Japanese and Korean war orphans and Korean “mascots.”<sup>3</sup> However, mixed-race Asian and American children in these countries soon captured the hearts and minds of the American public.

Although war had a devastating impact on all sectors of Japanese and Korean society, the lives of these mixed-race children were especially bleak. Japanese and Korean societies rejected these children because many of them were conceived outside of wedlock, they looked physically different, and even more importantly they embodied the unequal geopolitical relationships between nations. American as well as Asian prejudices contributed to the social ostracism of these children. Although an American military presence in Japan and Korea was responsible for these children's births, many American fathers deserted their children, the US military discouraged marriages between American soldiers and Asian women, and the US government bore no official responsibility for the children's or their mothers' welfare. Thus, the plight of mixed-race Asian and American children in Japan, Korea, and later Vietnam, deepened the linkages between international adoption and humanitarian rescue during the Cold War period.

As governments on both sides of the Pacific Ocean refused to take responsibility, concerned individuals and non-governmental organizations stepped in to provide some relief to the children and their mothers. The most famous example of international adoption during this time period was the adoption of eight Korean children by Harry and Bertha Holt in 1955. The Holts went on to organize mass adoptions of Korean War orphans by American born-again Christian families and the Holt Adoption Program was officially incorporated in 1956. Other evangelical Christian organizations involved in facilitating Korean international adoption included World Vision, Christ Is the Answer Foundation, and Everett Swanson Evangelistic Association. As historian Ellen Herman notes, the intertwining of adoption, child rescue, and religious fervor has a longer history, beginning with many nineteenth-century US domestic placements and persisting in the case of children produced in the Dutch and French colonies of Southeast Asia during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Harry and Bertha Holt's influence, and the confluence of adoption, religion, and rescue, persist in the twenty-first century. Holt International, as it is known today, continues to be a major force in the placement of internationally adopted children.

A well-known non-sectarian adoption placement agency that emerged during the early Cold War period was Welcome House, an international and transracial adoption agency in the United States that was founded by famed writer Pearl S. Buck in 1949. Best known for her best-selling and Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Good Earth*, which was developed into an Academy Award-winning film in 1937, Buck also made adoption history as a pioneer in publicizing the plight of mixed-race children born to US servicemen and Asian women. She is credited for coining the word "Amerasian." Welcome House facilitated adoption placements until 2014, when the Pearl S. Buck International organization phased out all of its adoption (international, domestic, search, pre- and post-placement) program services (Lapinig 2013).

By the mid-1960s, international adoption from Japan declined as the result of Japanese government efforts to integrate mixed-race Japanese-Americans, improved economic conditions, and an increase in domestic adoptions. However, the problem of mixed-race children in Korea persisted. While there was some evidence of changing Korean attitudes towards this group, the Korean government continued to support international adoption as a solution to social, political, and economic conditions. The charisma and popularity of individual adoption advocates in Korea, such as Harry Holt, contributed to the perpetuation of the practice.

Informal relationships as well as organizational programs inspired and facilitated international adoption. For example, in the 1960s, close



friendships between the pioneering generation of Swedish adoptive parents and child welfare advocates in India expanded international adoption activity in India between the 1970s and 1980s. They also influenced the formation of the non-profit organization, Adoption Centre (AC), in Sweden in 1972. According to anthropologist Barbara Yngvesson (2010), AC's organizational structure and transnational adoption policy – most notably its non-profit status, procedural transparency, and government oversight – transformed Sweden into an international adoption nation with the world's highest adoption rate and the highest per capita population of transnational adoptees in the world.

From the late 1950s through the early 1970s, American families adopted more than 500 Chinese children from Hong Kong. The deplorable, severely overcrowded conditions of Chinese refugees who fled from communist mainland China to Hong Kong led to the increasing abandonment of their children. The United States branch of the International Social Service created the Hong Kong Project in 1958 to facilitate the adoption of these children by Chinese American families in the United States. Many of these children were boys and older children who were already known by their Chinese American adoptive families in the United States, although white American families also adopted these children. In the 1960s, predominantly white British families adopted 100 Chinese girls from Hong Kong orphanages (Feast et al. 2013). The adoption of “full-blooded” Chinese children by white American and British families marked a break from the predominant practice of racial matching in adoption placements and the adoption of mixed-race Asian-American children. It heralded the increasing social legitimacy of international and transracial adoption.

The historical context of the Cold War also informed the controversial origins of international adoption from Vietnam. During the fall of Saigon in April 1975, a US plan known as Operation Babylift evacuated 2700 Vietnamese children to the United States. Canada, Australia, and Europe also took in about 1300 children. Then, as now, Operation Babylift was controversial (Varzally 2017). On April 4, 1975, a military transport plane affiliated with this rescue effort crashed, killing more than 100 children and at least 25 of their adult escorts on board. And although the Vietnamese children of Operation Babylift were considered “orphans,” the reality was that many of them were children with parents still alive in Vietnam. The controversy over the motivations and merits of Operation Babylift and the adoption by Western, especially American, families was inextricably linked to dissenting views about US involvement in the Vietnam War. As a result, American motivations to adopt these children were both similar to and distinct from earlier histories of international adoption. As historian Allison Varzally (2016) elaborates: “Some Americans continued

to explain their will to adopt in terms of patriotism, anti-Communism, and humanitarianism, but more critical, subversive and explicitly political articulations came to prevail.”

While various wars created the earlier socio-historical contexts for the international adoption of children, the reasons behind the persistence of international adoption and implementation of its practice have changed dramatically over time. The case of South Korea as a top sending country of internationally adoptive children is notable in this regard. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, approximately 200 000 Korean children have been sent to the United States for adoption, and an additional 50 000 children have been sent to Europe (Yuh 2005, p. 279). While post-Korean War devastation and poverty compelled the Korean government to seek international solutions for the plight of mixed-race Korean-American children, by the mid-1970s, South Korea was no longer a poor nation. Yet, Korean international adoption persisted through the 1970s and 1980s, with “full-blooded” Korean children being adopted abroad, the result of the social stigmatization of single mothers and their children born out of wedlock, as well as limited social services and financial support for them and low-income Korean families.

Since the 1980s, the number of international adoptions has increased exponentially, and both the sending and receiving countries of adoptive children have become much more diverse. From 1993 to 2005, Russia was the largest or second-largest sending country of adopted children to the United States. After its peace accords in 1996, Guatemala’s participation in international adoption almost doubled, from 731 children in 1996 to 1278 in 1997, and continued to increase steadily. In contrast to the United States and Sweden, the history of international adoption in Spain is more recent. It is a phenomenon that became significant in the mid-1990s. In addition to socio-historical factors that have contributed to a shortage of local children for adoption, anthropologist Diana Marre (2009, p. 231) points to the repeated broadcasting of a 1995 British television program, *The Rooms of Death*, about orphanages in China, which inspired humanitarian impulses to adopt.

While unique, transnational linkages gave rise to adoption between specific sending and receiving countries, a global relational context is also important for understanding why potential adoptive parents turn to particular countries for adoption. After specific countries end adoption programs or impose restrictions, the popularity of adoption from other countries increases. For example, international adoption from Ethiopia soared by 150 percent between 2002 and 2005 after new restrictions – such as eligibility requirements, adoption agency regulations, domestic adoption initiatives – were implemented in China, Russia, and South Korea.

## CULTURAL SECURITY AND INSECURITY IN INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

Issues of human security and cultural security justified international adoption. Children's vulnerability in the sending countries and the promise of a better future in the receiving countries informed the rationale that separated families in their original countries while concurrently creating new ones abroad. Many government officials and journalists lauded international adoption efforts during the post-World War II and Cold War periods. However, critical concerns soon emerged. These concerns included the hasty relinquishment of children, the abuse of adoptive children in the receiving countries, and the commodification of children for an international adoption market.

Doubts about the ethical implementation of international adoption arose from the concern that birth relatives' opportunities to fully consider the impact of adoption were grossly insufficient. Officials of the International Social Service, a non-governmental and non-sectarian organization, recalled that in European countries after World War II, international agencies took children too quickly from mothers in refugee camps (Choy 2013, p. 36). In his study of the adoption of children from Japan by American families between 1952 and 1955, Lloyd Barner Graham observed that only a minority of Japanese mothers of mixed-race children received social casework help when making decisions regarding adoption. They often made the decision to relinquish their children under great social and economic duress (Choy 2013, p. 36).

Other controversial issues included the use of proxy adoptions, in which adoptive parents designated a proxy agent to act in their place in order to adopt a child in a foreign court. In other words, they adopted a child "sight unseen" through a third party abroad. The proxy method had initially been used to facilitate post-World War II international adoptions from Germany and Greece, but it became more widespread due to the efforts of Harry Holt to organize mass international adoptions from Korea. Proxy adoptions accelerated the international adoption process, but a 1958 study of proxy adoptions conducted by Laurin Hyde and Virginia Hyde detailed the risks that accompanied proxy adoptions, including cases of physical abuse in the international adoptive families (Choy 2013, p. 93).

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, international adoption has continued to be controversial. The demands for adoptive children and speedy adoption procedures have produced a lucrative adoption market involving corruption, fraud, and human trafficking. In addition to the example of China discussed in the introduction, the stratospheric rise and then end of Guatemalan international adoption is a

case in point. By 2006, Guatemala became the country with the highest per capita transnational adoption rate in the world, and the practice became a significant source of foreign currency (Dubinsky 2010, p. 108). An international anti-corruption commission documented more than 3000 irregular cases of adoption involving, for example, the falsification of documents and bribery of legal officials. The exposure of corruption in Guatemalan international adoption led to a halt of the practice in 2007 (Martin 2017). Charges of corruption have also haunted international adoption from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Romania.

Furthermore, international adoption shifts governments' attention outward as opposed to strengthening indigenous social services and socio-economic opportunities that might keep families together in their original country. In 1996, Korea joined the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a sign of its rise to international affluence and a reflection of its commitment to democratic government and the market economy. In the twenty-first century, it is one of the largest economies in the world (Kim 2007, p. 15). Thus, post-war devastation and poverty can no longer explain the continuation of Korean international adoption in contemporary times. The number of international adoptions from Korea significantly decreased after negative publicity depicted South Korea as an exporter of its most precious resource – its own children – during the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. Yet, Korean international adoption continues in the present. Its persistence has politicized individuals and organizations who have called for attention to be paid to the birth families and their hardships, as well as to adult international adoptees who seek support to reunite with their birth family, resources to learn the language of their birth country, and other pathways of recognition and integration in both their sending and receiving countries. They have raised broader critical questions about the government's socio-economic motives for separating family members and perpetuating adoption as a solution for single mothers and other non-traditional families.

In recent times, the non-citizenship status of many international adoptees in the United States, the world's leading recipient of internationally adoptive children, has illuminated the vulnerability of international adoptees. According to the advocacy group Adoptee Rights Campaign, an estimated 35000 adoptees in the United States do not have citizenship (Stack and Hauser 2016). Their non-citizenship status, when combined with convictions for both petty as well as serious crimes, makes them subject to deportation. In a June 12, 2012 letter, Kate Mee-Hee Sands, president of Adopsource, and Jennifer Kwon Dobbs and Bert Ballard, co-directors of Adoptee Rights and Equality (Sands et al. 2012), together with 22 organizations and 30 individuals, penned a passionate plea to

former US President Barack Obama about the deportation of Kairi Shepherd, an Indian adoptee with advanced multiple sclerosis, characterizing the issuance of deportation as a “death sentence.” Shepherd had been convicted of check fraud for which she had served her time, but she was not a US citizen. Although she was adopted in the United States when she was three months old, under the Child Citizenship Act (CCA), she was ineligible for automatic US citizenship because she turned 18 before February 27, 2001. Her mother had died of breast cancer before she could submit Kairi’s naturalization application.

Kairi’s case is not a singular one. The letter highlighted 40 additional cases of deported or detained adult adoptees, as reported in the media and to overseas post-adoption service non-governmental organizations, with all 40 cases involving non-violent offenses. Its authors emphasized the stark contradiction between contemporary US immigration policy and the humanitarian motivations of international adoption:

America’s longstanding recognition of the special plight of orphans has also led to the removal of policies that slowed down or acted as barriers to intercountry adoptions out of the belief that expedient placement in loving homes is in children’s best interests. Through no fault of their own, not all of these adopted children became citizens . . . and they ‘fell through the cracks.’”

In recent months, the suicide of Korean American adoptee Phillip Clay has brought to light some of the harsh realities faced by international adoptees in their sending and receiving countries. A Philadelphia couple adopted then eight-year-old Phillip in 1983, but encounters with drugs, jail, and mental health centers marked his adult life in the United States. Philip was also one of the tens of thousands of adoptees who had fallen through the cracks and was not a US citizen (Gammage 2017). He was deported to Korea in 2012, where he struggled to speak the Korean language and make connections with other Koreans, including other Korean adoptees, the majority of whom have voluntarily returned to their birth country. Korean adoptees in Korea, including Adam Crasper who was also deported to Korea in 2016, denounced Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs for claiming ignorance regarding the adoptees’ deportation issues. According to a *Korea Times* news story (You 2017), Adam Crasper noted that “these are not just sad stories . . . They are the results of failure in government policies.”

Finally, a more mundane, but no less controversial issue that challenges the dominant narrative of international adoption as a pathway to human security is the racism encountered by international, transracial adoptees in their receiving countries. Daily encounters with micro-aggressions and blatant racism create a state of non-belonging that plagues even those

international, transracial adoptees with political citizenship. Since the late 1990s, a growing body of memoirs, documentary films, and anthologies by primarily Korean American adoptees who have come of age underscore the theme of their numerous encounters with racism in the United States (Choy 2013, p. 4). Similarly, in the late twentieth century, generations of internationally and transracially adopted children in Sweden have come of age, and in the 1980s and 1990s they challenged the widespread belief that racism does not exist in Sweden (Yngvesson 2010). Cultural productions in the forms of memoirs, poetry, performances, and visual art by adult international adoptees emphasized the significance of racial difference and racism in their lives, and their connection to immigrant populations in the United States, Sweden, and other parts of the world.

## CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS BY INTERNATIONAL ADOPTEES

Cultural productions by international adoptees inform audiences about the challenges and needs of their communities. In doing so, they can also be vehicles for change. If cultural security, as defined by Tehranian (2004, p. 3), signifies “the security of personal and collective negotiations” that include, but are not limited to, freedom of cultural as well as political participation, then increased attention to, support of, and engagement with the burgeoning artistic expression by and about international adoptees is an important step towards cultural security.

The scope of cultural productions by international adoptees is expansive, involving artists from many different birth and adoptive countries. They engage in a variety of genres including film, visual art, songwriting, graphic narratives, poetry, and memoir, among others. In this section, I feature the work of songwriter and Vietnamese adoptee Jared Rehberg, painter and Guatemalan adoptee Xhiv Bogart, and writer and Korean adoptee Jane Jeong Trenka, to illuminate the central role that the arts play in international adoptees’ stories, especially in relation to validating their experiences and creating a sense of belonging.

While the featured artists in this section are by no means representative of international adoptees’ experiences and artistic expression, they reflect some of the breadth of adoptees’ national origins, specifically Vietnam and Guatemala as well as Korea (which is often used to exemplify international adoption experience because of its pioneering and long international adoption history). These artists also utilize diverse genres to express, document, and share their personal stories as well as collective histories of international adoptees. As a result, their artistic work speaks to common

or recurring themes: the affective and political ties that bind international adoptees; their own struggles with or their awareness of other adoptees' struggles with depression and suicide; and their hopes and advocacy for a better life for younger generations of adoptees.

### Jared Rehberg

Jared Rehberg is a Vietnamese adoptee and folk-pop singer and songwriter based in New York City. Also known as Vu Tien Anh, Rehberg was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1974. He arrived in the United States in April 1975 during the week of Operation Babylift. Inspired by a reunion of adult adoptees in 2000, Rehberg's original songs about international adoption became his life's work. He has released three CDs – *Waking Up American* (2003), *Somewhere In the Middle* (2009), and *Chasing Dragonflies* (2015) – that illuminate various aspects of his adoption journey. For example, in the lyrics of *Waking Up American*, Rehberg speaks of his rebirth via adoption in the United States when he refers to the American patriotic song, "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Yet, he also calls for a recognition of the adoptive child's wholeness and connection with the birth family and original country. As Rehberg writes, "I want to run with ghosts, across empty fields / I'll fish on the delta with the past by my side." The song's refrain brings attention to his personal loss, while at the same time emphasizing his sense of wholeness: "Without me, without you / I'm living in America with a brand new name / Without you, without me / I'm waking up American on a brand new day / And I'm still the same, I'm still the same."<sup>5</sup>

Rehberg's achievements in songwriting come out of struggle. As he noted in an interview, "It took a long time to be proud of myself and the fact that I was an adoptee and Asian." A major part of this struggle involved his experience during his first visit back to Vietnam in 2002, which he described as "uncomfortable." Rehberg elaborated, "Feelings of not belonging there collided with thoughts of not belonging at home in the US . . . I spent much time looking out my hotel window feeling trapped in a world so foreign to me."

While his songwriting reflects his individual journey, Rehberg's work is also deeply connected to other Vietnamese and international adoptees and their adoptive families. He has served as a co-director of the Vietnam Camp for Heritage Camps for Adoptive Families (HCAF) in Colorado. HCAF started in 1991 with a summer camp for families with children adopted from Korea. It has since expanded to serve more than 1000 families annually in ten heritage camps for African/Caribbean, Cambodian, Chinese, Indian/Nepalese, Korean, Latin American, Russian/Eastern European/Central Asian, and Southeast Asian/Pacific Islander families (Heritage Camps for

Adoptive Families 2013). Rehberg is a co-director of its Southeast Asian/Pacific Islander Heritage Camp, which brings together families from Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and the Pacific Islands.

Rehberg has also served as a founding board member and is currently an advisor of Against The Grain Productions, a non-profit organization that promotes artistry in the Asian American community and that released the documentary film *Operation Babylift* in 2009. Rehberg's story was featured in the film and he also helped to produce it.<sup>6</sup> He considers families with children adopted from Vietnam and internationally among his greatest supporters, and feels a profound connection to younger adoptees:

When they reach out to me I feel like I've done something good. I hope to make their journey easier than mine . . . It's always heartbreaking to hear stories about depression and suicide within the adoptee community. The younger generations needs us . . . My heart and ears are open to all adoptees who need advice or need someone to talk to. (Le 2012)

### **Xhiv Bogart**

Xhiv Bogart is a Guatemalan adoptee and visual artist who works primarily in painting, but also in printmaking, sculpture, and fiber works. She was born in Guatemala to an Ixil Mayan family in 1991 and adopted by an American family in Phoenix, Arizona when she was an infant. Her artistic work explores questions of identity, family, home, culture, and place. In her artist's statement, she emphasizes a formative moment in her childhood: "When I was in second grade, I took my first step in consciously choosing an identity when I told my adoptive family that I wanted to be referred to by my Ixil name, Xhiv, rather than the American name they had given me" (Bogart 2014a). For Bogart, this choice of maintaining her original name was the beginning of a journey "of uncovering, processing, and claiming [her] multiple and contradictory identities as Ixil, as Guatemalan, as American, as an adoptee, and as an artist." Reuniting with her Ixil family in Guatemala when she was 14, and reconnecting with them again ten years later further impacted her art work.

Similar to other international adoptees' experiences, college was a defining time period for Bogart. As the first studio art graduate of Benedictine University at Mesa, Arizona, her 2016 senior thesis exhibition was entitled "Existing In Between."<sup>7</sup> In this series of paintings, Bogart explored issues of separation and loss, reunion and recovery, that arose from her adoption and her return visits to Guatemala. Paintings such as *New Beginning*, *Sister Love*, *Infancy*, *Early Childhood*, *Childhood*, *Blue Eyes*, *Lost*, and *Reflection* refer to life stages and reflections upon her identity in the United States. Others including *Returning*, *Nebaj*, *Split*, *Beneath*, *Hush*,



and *Ten Years Have Passed Since Our Last Embrace* document her return to Guatemala, with realistic depictions of people and landscapes as well as more abstract renditions of her emotional journey.

Bogart's individual experiences are also part of a broader history of Guatemalan international adoption. Next Generation Guatemala, a Guatemalan adoptee serving support network, publicized her exhibition. Bogart is one of many Guatemalan adoptees in the United States, Canada, Europe, and beyond who have diverse backgrounds and experiences. As Next Generation Guatemala (2015) notes in its network's mission and history, "Some adoptees have made return journeys to Guatemala and some have not. Some draw lineage from the twenty-three distinct Mayan peoples, and others draw lineage from the mestizo and Spanish population. Some have used their unique world citizenship to find ways to serve the betterment of Guatemala."

In her artist's statement on her website, Bogart writes that the bright colors and detailed textures of her painting "evoke the vividness of Guatemalan craftwork." For more than a decade, she has applied this Guatemalan-inspired painting process to her artistic rendition of family photographs. In her paintings of these photos, she pays close attention to physical features as well as mannerisms in order to highlight nature as well as nurture. In doing so, Bogart also claims her ability to redefine the boundaries of family and home for herself as well as a broader community of viewers:

While I paint I have full control over colors and brush strokes that create my interpretation of the photograph. The process of painting and having control is an important part of the mental processing because in the moments I am depicting I may not have had control. I am able to reclaim bittersweet moments in my life through the painting process. (Bogart 2014a)

### Jane Jeong Trenka

Jane Jeong Trenka is the author of two memoirs, *Language of Blood* and *Fugitive Visions*. Born in Korea in 1972 and adopted by a family in Minnesota, she is part of a long-standing diaspora of Korean international adoptees. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the phenomenon has spanned six decades and involved more than 200,000 Korean children adopted by families in Western nations (primarily the United States, but also France, Sweden, and Denmark). Korean adult adoptees have paved the way for what has become a more common experience of returning to Korea to tour the homeland, to attempt to reunite with their Korean birth families, and in more recent times, to settle there.

Trenka is one of the several hundreds of returning adoptees who have

transformed Korea's cultural and political landscape through her writing and her political activism. A co-founder of the organization Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea, Trenka worked with KoRoot (an adoptee guesthouse and support network run by Pastor Kim Do-hyun and his wife, Kong Jungae), Adoptee Solidarity Korea (ASK, an advocacy organization of Korean adult adoptees living in Korea), Dandelions (a group of Korean birthparents who had placed their children for adoption), and Kumfa (an organization for single mothers), to amend South Korea's adoption law. In 2012, they succeeded in making several important changes, including counseling for women; a waiting period before placing a child for adoption; and the registry of all adoptions through the courts. The registry creates a pathway for Korean adoptees to trace their history, addressing their struggle to locate their birth families (see Jones 2015). Thus, while the numbers of returning Korean adoptees in Seoul may be relatively small, their impact on the Korean homeland is profound.

Trenka's return to Korea to live there is documented in her second memoir, *Fugitive Visions*, published by Graywolf Press in 2009. *Fugitive Visions* defies simple categorization. It is also a poetic ethnography of the collective experiences of returning adoptees who chose to live in Korea on a long-term basis in the twenty-first century, and a call for recognition of the racism and violence experienced by Korean adoptees in Korea as well as in the diaspora. In *Fugitive Visions*, Trenka bears witness to returning Korean adoptees' unique homesickness that stems from being unintentional immigrants in the land of their birth. Trenka (2009, p.149) documents how the collective loneliness experienced by returning Korean adoptees at times results in self-inflicted violence in the forms of self-mutilation and addictions to alcohol and sex: "Inside *noraebangs* and *sulchips* we are making slow violence upon our bodies with pitchers of pale Korean beer and green bottles of soju" The loneliness and the pain stem from the perceived abnormality of being an overseas adopted Korean in Korea. As Trenka (2009, p.110) writes: "In a country where 'American' is used synonymously with 'white,' my inability to speak fluent Korean combined with my inability to be white is a deformity."

Partly because of Trenka's political activism and sharp critique of the Korean international adoption industry, observers at times dismiss her critical insights as symptomatic of unrelenting anger and unhappiness. Yet, fierce hopes and desires permeate her memoir. Despite the difficulty of living in Korea, Trenka (2009, p.95) concludes that there are many days when it is simply wonderful to be in Korea. In *Fugitive Visions*, she declares: "despite all these abandonments, all these tiny annihilations – I want to live."

## CONCLUSION: TOWARDS CULTURAL SECURITY THROUGH CULTURAL PRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, international adoption has irrevocably changed our definitions of family, identity, and home. It has created new families across the globe, but it has also been accompanied by and continues to generate controversy. Thus, cultural security as well as insecurity present a useful lens to view the range of discourses about international adoption. Engagement with cultural productions by international adult adoptees facilitates an ethical approach to understanding the phenomenon because it takes into account their perspectives, experiences, and needs.

Non-profit organizations, such as KoRoot and the Adoption Museum Project, provide important spaces to nurture and disseminate artistic work by and about international adoptees. In addition to serving as a guesthouse in Seoul for returning Korean adoptees, KoRoot has translated and co-published artistic and scholarly work, such as the 2006 anthology *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* edited by Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, in the Korean language to reach an audience of Korean policymakers as well as the general public.

The aim of the Adoption Museum Project is to envision a society that ensures all people involved in adoption experience justice and dignity. Their mission is to use the power of museums to help transform adoption. The Adoption Museum Project co-curated the exhibition “Operation Babylift: Perspectives and Legacies” with the Presidio Trust in San Francisco. The exhibition involved 33 000 visits and nine public programs in which the arts and the voices of adult adoptees played a central role. More than 350 visitors contributed reflections of the exhibition on public reflection cards (see Adoption Museum Project 2017).

The work of artists and adoptees such as Jared Rehberg, Xhiv Bogart, and Jane Jeong Trenka, and the transformative visions of KoRoot and Adoption Museum Project, deserve our attention and reflection. We can have a more productive discussion about international adoption by listening to adoptees’ stories and by helping to fund, document, and preserve their artistic expression.

## NOTES

1. “International adoption” is the current popular term used to describe the phenomenon of adoption across national borders. In the 1950s and 1960s, social workers commonly referred to this phenomenon as “intercountry” or “inter-country” adoption. Recently,

- some scholars of international adoption have preferred to use the term “transnational adoption” in order to emphasize the ways that the phenomenon creates a significant social field between two or more specific nation-states. See Yngvesson (2010), Kim (2010), Dorow (2006), and Volkman (2005).
2. According to US Immigration and Naturalization Service data, American families adopted 10099 children from Europe between 1948 and 1962, including 3116 children from Greece, 2575 children from Italy, and 1845 children from Germany. See Weil (1984, pp. 280–281).
  3. See Carp (1998), Klein (2003), and Herman (2008). The Korean “mascots” refer to the children who GI units took under their wings, providing them with clothing, food, and candy. For a discussion of the adoption of Korean War military mascots in relation to Korean international adoption, see Kim (2010, pp. 45, 47–53).
  4. See Herman (2008, p. 217). She frames the beginnings of international adoption in the United States as an organized movement that mobilized faith communities (Lutherans, Catholics, and Seventh-Day Adventists, among others) and that inspired the creation of organizations such as the American Joint Committee for Assisting Japanese-American Orphans.
  5. Lyrics for “Waking Up American” and some of Jared Rehberg’s other songs are available on his official website at <http://www.jaredrehberg.com/>. See Rehberg (n.d.).
  6. See “About” in Rehberg (n.d.).
  7. Thumbnails of the paintings in the series “Existing In-Between” are available at Bogart (2014b).

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